

The Ecosystem Readiness of Muslim-Friendly Eco-tourism in Kenyir Lake, Terengganu

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Abstract

Malaysia has solidified its hegemony as a global leader in the Muslim-Friendly Tourism (MFT) sector, an achievement that logically should catalyze parallel development at the state level. Kenyir Lake, Terengganu, designated as a Shariah-compliant tourism destination in 2017, manifests this aspiration. However, a significant governance paradox exists: a widening gap between official macro-level recognition and the fragmented reality of micro-level implementation. This article aims to conduct a critical diagnostic assessment of the readiness and maturity of the Muslim-friendly eco-tourism ecosystem in Kenyir Lake. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines policy document analysis, immersive fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews with tourism operators, this study uncovers three primary layers of issues: (1) the actual state of product offerings and Muslim-friendly practices on the ground, which are found to be more *ad-hoc* and 'incidental' rather than deliberate; (2) the systemic barriers contributing to this implementation gap, including conceptual ambiguity, the absence of practical guidelines, and an imbalanced governance focus; and (3) the criteria necessary to transition from symbolic branding to a holistic ecosystem reality. As a theoretical and practical contribution, this article proposes an integrated Muslim-Friendly Eco-tourism Ecosystem (MFE) Framework as a strategic tool to bridge the gap between policy and practice, thereby strengthening the integrity and authenticity of the Kenyir Lake brand as a world-class Muslim-friendly destination.

Keywords: Muslim-Friendly Tourism, Eco-tourism, Governance, Sustainable Development, Shariah-Compliant

Introduction

The global tourism sector is often depicted as a double-edged sword; it is a potent catalyst for economic growth (Inskeep, 1996), yet it simultaneously risks causing socio-cultural and

environmental degradation if not managed judiciously. Within this complex landscape, Malaysia has successfully carved a unique success narrative through Muslim-Friendly Tourism (MFT). Initiatives pioneered since 2008 (Noor & Masnisah, 2014) have cultivated a mature ecosystem, supported by a robust halal infrastructure and clear governmental commitment. This success is not mere rhetoric but is consistently validated by international ratings, such as the State of the Global Islamic Economy (SGIE) Report, which has repeatedly named Malaysia the top MFT destination for years (DinarStandard, 2023).

This momentum at the federal level is expected to trickle down and act as a catalyst for development at the state level. Terengganu, with its identity as a state steadfastly adhering to Islamic values, naturally presents an ideal platform for MFT expansion. Its recognition as a Muslim-Friendly Destination by the Universal Crescent Standard Center (UCSC) in 2018, followed by the gazettement of Kenyir Lake as a Shariah-compliant tourism destination a year earlier, appears to be a logical strategic move. It signals to the world that Terengganu, and specifically Kenyir Lake, is poised to become a leader in the Muslim-friendly eco-tourism segment.

However, a deeper analysis reveals a worrying **governance paradox**. A significant gap, or *schism*, exists between the policy declarations at the top and the operational realities on the ground. Research by Balqis Ibrahim et al. (2019) provides an initial glimpse, suggesting that Islamic tourism products in the state are still largely confined to the narrow framework of heritage visits to mosques and tombs. More critically, data from official recognition bodies like the Malaysia Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) (2022) and the Islamic Quality Standard (IQS) (2021) confirm a clear geographical disconnect: hotels receiving Muslim-friendly accreditation are concentrated in urban areas like Kuala Terengganu, while Kenyir Lake, touted as a Shariah-compliant destination, is conspicuously absent from any official listings.

This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: on what basis was this recognition granted? If the tourism ecosystem at Kenyir Lake—particularly among the eco-tourism operators who form the backbone of its attraction—has not yet cultivated Muslim-friendly elements in a structured and holistic manner, then the recognition risks being nothing more than an empty brand. This implementation gap is not merely an operational issue but a strategic threat to the brand's integrity and tourist trust in the long run. Therefore, this article undertakes the responsibility of conducting a critical post-mortem of this issue, and also to develop and propose a practical framework for building an integrated Muslim-friendly eco-tourism ecosystem at Kenyir Lake.

Literature Review

The Epistemological Evolution of Muslim-Friendly Tourism (MFT)

The academic discourse on MFT has undergone a significant epistemological evolution. The initial paradigm, as discussed by Henderson (2016), tended to be product-centric and reductionist, equating MFT with "halal tourism," which revolved around tangible compliance aspects such as halal food, Shariah-compliant finance, and alcohol-free accommodation. While important, this approach failed to capture the deeper experiential and value-based dimensions. Contemporary scholarship has now shifted towards an experience-centric paradigm, where MFT is viewed as a "holistic ecosystem" designed to meet the physical,

spiritual, and emotional needs of Muslim tourists at every touchpoint of their journey (Battour, 2018; Samori et al., 2016). This approach demands a more nuanced understanding, encompassing aspects such as privacy, safety, ethical entertainment content, and customer service that reflects Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*).

A Conceptual Synthesis of Shariah-Compliant Eco-tourism

Although they may seem like disparate fields, eco-tourism and Islamic ethics share a common philosophical foundation. Eco-tourism, as defined by Weaver (2001), is based on three pillars: nature conservation, community empowerment, and interpretive education. These principles resonate strongly with the core tenets of Islam. The concepts of *Khalifah* (humanity as guardians or stewards of the Earth), *Mizan* (ecological balance), and *Amanah* (trust and responsibility) form a robust Islamic environmental theology (Hassan, 2020). Thus, eco-tourism activities can become a vessel for *tadabbur alam*—a process of contemplation and appreciation of the magnificence of God's creation.

Based on this synthesis, Shariah-compliant eco-tourism can be conceptualized as "a form of sustainable, nature-based tourism in which its management and execution are aligned with the framework of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), aimed at fostering a spiritual connection between humans and the Creator through ethical interaction with His creation" (Samori & Rahman, 2021). This conceptualization has practical implications: jungle trekking packages should be accompanied by guidance on modest attire and conduct; kayaking activities should be scheduled with consideration for prayer times; and the houseboat experience should be designed to preserve privacy and provide an environment conducive to worship.

The Theory of Policy Implementation Gaps and Its Relevance

The phenomenon at Kenyir Lake is a classic example of a "policy implementation gap," a concept popularized by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984). This gap refers to the failure to translate the intentions and objectives of a policy formulated at the top level into the desired outcomes at the bottom level. In this context, a "top-down" implementation model, where central or state authorities make decisions and branding declarations, often fails because it does not adequately consider the capacity, resources, and perceptions of the implementers on the front line (Ismail & Othman, 2022).

Adapting the theory of "street-level bureaucrats" by Lipsky (1980), the tourism operators at Kenyir Lake can be considered "frontline tourism operators." They are the true agents who translate the "Shariah-compliant" policy into a tangible experience for tourists. The failure of the policy to cascade down to their level, as indicated by the study of Balqis Ibrahim et al. (2019), is the primary reason why the grand recognition remains a slogan suspended in mid-air, devoid of a solid reality.

Research Methodology

To unravel the complex layers of this phenomenon, this study adopts a qualitative case study design. This approach was chosen for its ability to explore the context, processes, and the "how" and "why" dynamics of the implementation gap in Kenyir Lake. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich informants, comprising 12 tourism operators (including 5

houseboat operators, 4 chalet operators, and 3 independent tour guides) and 3 officials from relevant government agencies.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed, combining three primary data sources:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions, knowledge levels, current practices, operational challenges, and suggestions for improvement from the operators' perspectives.
2. **Document Analysis:** Critical documents such as the Kenyir Lake gazette paper, the UCSC recognition report, and official promotional materials were analyzed to understand the rationale, definitions, and criteria used by the authorities in their policy declarations.
3. **Field Observation:** Observational visits were made to strategic locations such as the main jetties (Pengkalan Gawi, Jenagor), several selected houseboats and chalets, and popular trekking trails. These observations aimed to directly assess the availability and quality of physical facilities that support Muslim-friendly practices.

All collected data, including interview transcripts and field notes, were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis process, involving data coding, identification of recurring themes, and in-depth interpretation to construct an analytical narrative.

Findings and Discussion

The Landscape of Offerings: Between 'Incidental' and 'Intentional'

The primary finding of this study confirms that the landscape of Muslim-friendly eco-tourism offerings in Kenyir Lake is currently driven more by **'incidental'** factors than by **'intentional'** design. The existing Muslim-friendly elements are a result of the local socio-cultural context (the majority of operators being Muslim Malays), rather than a planned product design strategy. A houseboat operator stated, "We certainly don't serve alcohol, and my wife cooks the food, so it's definitely halal. But to say our package is 'Muslim-friendly,' we've never branded it that way. It's just the same as always."

This lack of intentional product design is evident in the finer details. Observations found that only 2 out of the 5 houseboats visited had a clearly marked Qibla direction. Prayer essentials like mats and garments had to be specifically requested and were often in less-than-ideal condition. One respondent shared his experience, "Once, a tourist from an Arab country asked for a prayer mat, and only then did we scramble to find one. The prayer room at the jetty is sometimes used to store life jackets." This indicates that the worship needs of tourists are still viewed as an additional request, not a core component of the service offering.

Analyzing the Root Causes of the Implementation Gap

Thematic analysis revealed three interconnected, systemic barriers that are the root cause of this implementation gap:

- **Conceptual Ambiguity and a Guideline Vacuum:** There is a fundamental confusion among operators regarding the true meaning of "Shariah-compliant eco-tourism." Their definition is very narrow and limited to prohibitions (no alcohol, no illicit activities). They fail to translate this concept into positive elements that could serve as a Unique Selling Proposition (USP), such as a "Dawn Tazkirah (sermon) on the Water" package or a "Herbal Discovery Session from a Quranic Perspective." The absence of any practical guidelines,

checklists, or training modules from the authorities has created a vacuum, leaving operators hesitant to innovate.

- **Economic Rationality and Perceived Risks:** The economic barrier is more a matter of perception than reality. Operators assume that any effort to upgrade facilities or obtain certification would involve high costs with no guaranteed return on investment. More importantly, there is a fear that branding that is too "Islamic" will alienate non-Muslim tourist segments. A chalet operator argued, "If I brand my place as a 'Shariah-Compliant Chalet,' non-Muslims might be afraid to come. My customers are mixed." This concern highlights a failure in communication from the authorities to explain that MFT is inclusive and aims to offer a comfortable and ethical environment for all.
- **A Disconnected Discourse and Institutional Silos:** There is a disconnected discourse between policymakers and operators on the ground. The authorities are preoccupied with macro-level branding and promotion, while operators are left to interpret the policy on their own. An agency official admitted, "Our focus is to promote the 'Shariah-Compliant Kenyir' brand as a whole. Specific programs for individual operators are still in the planning stages." This failure of strategic cascade causes a well-intentioned policy to hang at the top without an effective implementation mechanism at the bottom.

Symbolic Branding without Operational Substance

These findings conclusively unravel the paradox at the core of this article. The recognition granted to Kenyir Lake was most likely based on symbolic and macro-political benchmarks—such as its location within a state governed by an Islamic party and the general absence of overt entertainment centers—rather than on a detailed audit of the tourism ecosystem's readiness at the operational level. It is a form of branding that precedes the product. Without genuine operational substance to support it, this brand risks eroding and can lead to disappointment among tourists who arrive with high expectations.

The Way Forward: Introducing the Muslim-Friendly Eco-tourism Ecosystem (MFE³) Framework

To address this critical gap and to transition from rhetoric to reality, this article proposes a practical and integrated Muslim-Friendly Eco-tourism Ecosystem (MFE³) Framework. This framework is designed to serve as a guide for all stakeholders and is built upon four complementary pillars, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

The Muslim-Friendly Eco-tourism Ecosystem (MFE³) Framework for Kenyir Lake

Pillar	Core Criteria	Practical Implementation & Elaboration
1. Products & Activities	Integrated & Ethical Offerings	This framework emphasizes a shift from 'incidental' to 'intentional' offerings. This includes developing structured packages like a "Tadabbur Alam (Nature Contemplation) Package" that combines jungle trekking with brief reflection sessions on Quranic verses related to nature. A "Prayer-Time Compliant Fishing Package" would offer flexible schedules and facilities for prayer on the houseboat. Furthermore, promoting a modest dress code for water activities and providing wholesome entertainment content (e.g., family-friendly movies) on houseboats are part of this holistic experience.
2. Facilities & Infrastructure	Worship-Friendly & Modesty-Conscious	This pillar focuses on providing the physical facilities that support Islamic practices. This is not limited to standardized Qibla indicators and clean prayer mats/garments , but also innovations like "Eco-Friendly Ablution Stations" at trail stops that use natural water sources sustainably. The maintenance of prayer rooms at main jetties must be a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the jetty management. Privacy is also emphasized, such as in the layout of chalets or bathing areas.
3. Services & Human Capital	Ethical & Knowledgeable Tour Guides	Human capital is the lifeblood of quality service. The framework proposes the development of a "Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide" training module that teaches not only facts about flora and fauna but also the skills to integrate stories from the Quran and Hadith, professional ethics of interaction, and basic knowledge of the jurisprudence for travelers (<i>fiqh al-musafir</i>). Operators and staff need continuous exposure to the cultural sensitivities and needs of Muslim tourists from diverse backgrounds to avoid stereotypes.
4. Governance & Marketing	Collaborative & Authentic	This pillar calls for a paradigm shift in the role of authorities, from being 'regulators' to 'enablers.' This can be manifested through the provision of matching grant incentives for operators who upgrade their facilities and the creation of a local-level recognition system (e.g., "Kenyir Lake Worship-Friendly Houseboat Rating"). Marketing strategies must be based on authenticity , showcasing the real experiences offered, and avoiding promises that cannot be delivered (<i>overselling</i>).

Conclusion

This article has conducted a critical post-mortem of the policy implementation gap phenomenon in Muslim-friendly tourism at Kenyir Lake. The findings empirically confirm the existence of a serious paradox between the grand official recognition and the underdeveloped operational reality. This gap, rooted in systemic factors such as conceptual ambiguity, a lack of practical guidelines, and imbalanced governance, is a strategic threat that must be addressed urgently.

The implications of this study are clear. For policymakers, it is a call to overhaul the governance philosophy—shifting from a declarative "top-down" approach to a collaborative and facilitative one. Recognition must be accompanied by action, and branding must be backed by substance. For tourism operators, it is an invitation to innovate and to see Muslim-friendly tourism not as a cost burden or a restriction, but as an opportunity to create added value and a unique product that can attract a growing global market. The proposed MFE³ Framework is not a final solution, but a starting point, a strategic roadmap to begin the journey of bridging this gap. Ultimately, the most valuable currency in the Muslim-Friendly Tourism industry is not certificates or recognitions, but the authenticity of the experience and the integrity of the brand. This is the real challenge and opportunity for Kenyir Lake.

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